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AUTHOR Newcomb, Thomas L.
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ABSTRACT

While the Amish are an established cultural group in the United States, Amish children are relatively ignored as a cultural and language minority group in public schools. Little information is available to the educator wishing to understand these children. Teacher education programs do not prepare teachers to deal with the language and experience backgrounds of Amish children while respecting their religious codes for action, dress, belief, and avoidance. The Amish home and culture are significantly different from mainstream society. Most Amish acquired their German dialect as their first language. The Amish child is clearly an English-as-a-Second-Language student in school. Amish children have great educational promise, but achievement depends on the learning environment. Limited studies at local levels have indicated that bilingual/multicultural education can be helpful to Amish children. Possible strategies include: treating this population as a bilingual-cultural minority; identifying, recognizing, and remediating cultural and language barriers; acknowledging cultural and language influences in testing; gathering information on the Amish for teachers; improved communication and interaction with the Amish community, including preparation of children for school; and including the Amish culture in teacher preparation courses. A variety of strategies can also be used to integrate and accommodate Amish children into the classroom. (MSE)

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THE AMISH CHILD AS AN E.S.L. CULTURALLY DIFFERENT LEARNER IN THE RURAL PUBLIC SCHOOL CLASSROOM

Dr. Thomas L. Newcomb
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Dr. Thomas L. Newcomb

Further Information:

Dr. Thomas L. Newcomb
19130 Nelson-Parkman Rd.
Garrettsville, Ohio 44231

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A Significant Population

The Amish are basically a rural people, descending from the Anabaptists of the Reformation Period. They are a group of related Christian churches. It is estimated that there are approximately 100,000 Amish people today. The entire population is found in North and Central America, the majority being in the United States. The Amish culture and lifestyle is a mixture of Biblical and traditional beliefs and practices. The Amish are recognized in educational circles for the establishment and operation of their own parochial schools (Keim, 1975; Newcomb 1983b). Over 460 such schools are now in operation with an enrollment of over 15,000 (Pathway, 1988). It is believed, however, that a substantial number of Amish children are attending rural public schools in such states as Ohio, Indiana and Iowa (Newcomb, 1983b). A search by the author of educational agencies in several states with Amish populuations gave no evidence of any Title VII or other specially funded programs serving the specific needs of Amish pupils in public schools.

A Unique People

Why are Amish children relatively ignored as a cultural and language minority in public schools? There may be a number of reasons.

*The Amish are a linguistic, cultural, and religious minority. Their society interweaves social, religious and cultural beiefs and practices. Little, if any information, is easily available to the educator wishing to understand them fully. Most teacher preparation programs ignore the Amish as a population in their cultural foundations and bilingual classes. The Amish society is a very basic traditional one that shuns many of the practices, conveniences and trends of contemporary society. Dealing with the language and experience backgrounds of their children, while respecting their religious codes for action, dress, belief and avoidance can be difficult for the public school.

*Since the Amish are a small and unique minority, the public schools are often hesitant to identify them as special needs pupils. Since their society also has a substantial parochial school system, public schools tend to feel that there are other options open to Amish parents. Little information or background is avialble to public school officials on the Amish children and their educational needs. Because of the religious nature of Amish life, and past legal battles for autonomy, public school agencies tend to have a "limited interaction" policy in dealing with the Amish people.

Cultural and Language Barriers

The Amish home and culture has several significant differences from mainstream society. The traditional lifestyle and homelife of most Amish homes, as well as the social customs, place many Amish children at a disadvantage in the modern public school. Many facilities, social customs, instructional materials and devices and instructional concepts may be very new and unfamiliar to the Amish child.

Most Amish children have acquired their home language as their first language. This language is a German dialect tracing back to the

European roots of the Amish. It is properly called "Pennsylvania German" and it is the language of the Amish home and culture. Pennsylvania German is basically a spoken language, although it has been written by scholars and historians who have developed a written grammar. The formal written religious language of Amish society (used in hymnbooks and Bibles) is formal "High" German. Some Amish children have little exposure to English until beginning school. English is a secondary language in Amish society. The Amish child is clearly an English As A Second Language (ESL) pupil in the public school.

Learning Potential

Studies by a few professional educators who have gained Amish confidence have shown that Amish children have very high educational promise despite their unique backgrounds (Hostetler & Huntington, 1971). Achievement, however, is very dependent on the learning environment. Limited studies at local levels have indicated that bilingual/multicultural instruction can be helpful to Amish children (Newcomb, 1979; Newcomb 1983b).

Solutions

*Public school officials must see the Amish child as a bilingual-cultural minority pupil. Special steps and adjustments in curriculum should be taken to meet the needs of these children. Expert researchers and quality printed materials and studies should be acquired and studied to better understand the Amish child and his background.

*The cultural and language barriers present to the Amish child when beginning public school must be identified, recognized and remediated in a fashion that will foster better self concept as well as improvement.

*When evaluating and testing Amish children for special education, the cultural and language barriers in standardized tests should be taken into consideration. The influences of child-rearing and life in Amish homes could also exert influence on psychological profiles of Amish pupils.

*Public schools should accumulate extensive readings and resources on Amish society, Amish children and educating Amish children. The few scholars in the field should be consulted for ideas and insight.

* Public schools should seek to improve communications and interactions with the Amish community. Cooperative work in better preparing children prior to school would be very valuable. The consultation of Amish school teachers might prove to be of help to public school teachers.

*Colleges and universities should be encouraged to include the Amish people in bilingual and cultural foundations courses for educators. This is especially important in states or areas with significant Amish populations.

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Classrom Stategies For Coping

Adapted from the National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education FORUM, March-April 1989, Comsis Corporation, Silver Spring, MD.

I. Cultural Adjustment

1. Attempt to have some aspect of the Amish culture in the classroom. This could be done with a bulltin board, books, pictures or displays that reflect aspects of Amish life.

2. Enhance student's self-concept by recognizing the positive qualities and experiences they already bring to school. Emphasize the progress they have already made.

3. Help pupils develop realistic expectations for themselves in their learning about school and outside society. Make sure they understand your expectations for their adjustment and progress.

4. Help the children develop coping skills so that they will not overreact to new or stressful situations.

5. The basic psychological profile of the Amish child should be kept in mind: quiet, reticent, a careful and exacting worker, wishing to emulate his or her own people, a group social mentality, cautious of strangers.

B. Culture and Family

1. Learn about Amish cultural differences and be sensitive to them when teaching.

2. Provide time and opportunity for the children to share information about their home, family, and cultural lifestyle during social studies, reading or other subjects.

3. Familiarize yourself with the different cultural, medical and religious practices of the Amish child and his family. These will affect participation and attendance.

Instructional Helps

1. When new students arrive, it may help to have older or more familiar Amish pupils help them to become situated or oriented.

2. During class, pose many questions related to the content of instruction to make sure students understand. Artistic or nonverbal reactions to questions or content can also be used to check comprehension.

3. Use nonverbal gestures, diagrams or pictures to supplement instruction.

4. Present instructions and concepts in as many modes as possible.

5. Make sure Amish children meet and interact with non-Amish pupils during some part of the school day, possibly during times when

much English proficiency is not required (art, gym and music). Ballance these interactions with allowing the Amish children to spend time with Amish peers. This will foster the feeling that the child belongs to both groups.

6. When possible, rely on concepts and experiences, already familiar to the Amish child, to present new concepts. Expect and be prepared to deal with the Amish child's difficulty in understanding new and unfamiliar concepts.

7. Write out class assignments and instructions to reinforce oral statements. When possible have students repeat or explain directions back to you to check comprehension.

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